

assaults (perhaps as much as a third, to gather from the reports), was committed by blacks against blacks. On July 16 a “colored man” tried to shoot a neighbor. On July 21 a black man stabbed by another was left in grave condition. On August 12 there appears another account in the *Morning Star* of a black man killed by a black man. On November 2 a “bloodthirsty Negro” assaulted his father and daughter.

Aside from break-ins and related burglaries, the other most frequent criminal activity which received press attention is what might be termed “sidewalk incidents.” The pages of the newspapers are replete with reports about verbal exchanges, insults, and outright assaults on the streets of Wilmington. The acts of effrontery most often were directed toward white women by black men, reports stated. If police filed a report, the charge could vary from nuisance to assault and battery. Typical were reports of young blacks locking arms and refusing to yield room to pass on the sidewalk. Other incidents involved more unusual circumstances. On July 8 the *Messenger* reported a “fistic encounter” between two prostitutes, one white and one black, a “disgusting spectacle,” according to the paper. In August the paper reported that a black policeman (thirteen of the city’s twenty-four were black) insulted a white woman. He had stopped on the sidewalk to inquire of a woman on her porch as to whether she had seen a suspect he was pursuing. She said that she had not; he accused her of lying, and thus was born an “incident.”

Given the highly partisan nature of the press of the day, it is wise to be circumspect when considering these newspaper reports. Historian H. Leon Prather, Sr., author of a 1984 book-length study of what he termed Wilmington’s “coup d’etat,” casts doubt on the reliability of the newspaper evidence. “One who fully understands Southern race relations in this era could hardly believe that most of the episodes actually occurred,” he wrote.

In seeking documentary evidence apart from newspapers to corroborate or contradict the reported increase in crime, I consulted two sets of records in the North Carolina State Archives. The minutes of the Wilmington Board of Aldermen contained very few references to criminal activity in the months leading up to November 1898. The exception was an ordinance adopted in April prohibiting anyone from throwing rocks at railway cars or streetcars. An ordinance adopted in early November prohibited the sale of liquor for five days either side of Election Day. Rather, the board members, at their monthly meetings, reviewed routine items about taxes, public health, trash collection, street repairs, vendors, noise, fireworks, water fountains, wagons blocking intersections, and various other matters. One task of the board was to set the city’s annual budget. For the four years preceding the violence of 1898, the budget averaged just under \$100,000. Of that amount, the appropriation for the police was just over \$17,000; the amount did not vary appreciably over the period.